

Testimony provided by Michelle Fecteau, Board Secretary, Michigan State Board of Education on October 19, 2017 before the Michigan House Education Committee.

Good Morning, Chair Kelly, Majority Vice-Chair Hornberger, Minority Vice Chair Zemke and all members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on House Joint Resolution M which would allow the governor to abolish the State Board of Education and appoint a director of education.

My name is Michelle Fecteau. I am board secretary for the Michigan state board of Education elected in 2012. I have lived in Detroit since 1990. I am also the wife of a special education teacher. The 2 of us have parented 18 children over the past 28 years. A number of our kids have disabilities, including autism, hearing impairment, cognitive disability. We became intimately involved with the effects of education reform policy. When Detroit experienced the first state takeover in 1999, I became active in advocating for special education students. That was my first step into the world of education policy.

In 2012, I felt compelled to run for the board out of a sense of duty. It was important, I would say essential, for the voices of parents, teachers, and students, especially those with disabilities to have a stronger voice in formulating education policy. From where I stood, I saw that they were shut out of the process. I am pleased to see so many teachers coming forward to run for elected office. I think they may have felt compelled for some of the same reasons.

I also ran because I strongly opposed initiatives being pushed down by the federal government under both President Bush's No Child Left Behind and Obama's Race to the Top, as well as the state take-overs from Lansing. I saw firsthand the devastating effects of these policies on students, teachers and my community.

Before coming, I spoke to my good friend and mentor, the former state board president Kathie Straus about the history of the state board and why the current structure was

incorporated into the state constitution. She told me that before the 1963 constitutional changes, the state superintendent was elected and vested with strong powers to oversee public education. The Board at the time was viewed as having little power. George Romney, a delegate to the constitutional convention, was a driving force in changing this and creating an 8-member education board, elected statewide, for “leadership and general supervision of all public education” who would then appoint the state superintendent. The design was to reflect locally elected school boards. The intent was to provide more voices at the table and greater input from the grassroots, rather than of consolidating decision-making power in one person. I think this was wise.

Delegate Romney expounded on the transfer of power in his remarks at the Constitutional Convention:

“The present constitution gives the superintendent of public instruction very broad authority over education, but he is not properly equipped either from the standpoint of staff and department or from the standpoint of ability to cover the full field to discharge that function. This contemplates the establishment of this board with these broad functions and, certainly, this provides a more suitable means of discharging these important functions.”

I have seen this in action. Having eight members allows for more input from differing perspectives and richer debate. We have members of various backgrounds, from business, government, labor, environmental science, music, higher education institutions, and K-12 education whose sole charge is to focus on overseeing public education. When we split on decisions, many times it’s not based on partisan positions, and we are often able to build consensus.

It has been said an appointed superintendent would de-politicize education policy decisions. I do not see it. The election of governor is a very politicized process. The governor is term-limited, as is the legislature, which reduces longer term accountability. Board members serve for 8 years without term-limits to reduce politicization.

Instead, I see the Board as a body that has worked well together and across the aisle. I have worked together with Lt Gov. Calley and accompanied him on a listening tour to many communities in the state where we listened to parents, teachers, administrators, students and others regarding special education services and ideas for improvement. I served on a bi-partisan Governor Special Ed Task Force with Eileen Weiser, a Republican. I have worked together with Tom McMillen and Casandra Ulbrich visiting priority schools, talking with school and community activists. I've worked on bi-partisan committees with Republicans led by Doreen Allen and Maureen Corrigan to develop policy on school discipline and climate I have also worked on bi-partisan committees focusing on DPS and DPSCD policy and special education funding.

An elected state board also provides a measure of transparency and input by being subject to the Open Meetings Act, and providing public comment at every meeting. I do not think this will be the case with an appointed Director of Education. I think the state would have been well served if DEQ had a similar Board. Perhaps we could have avoided the Flint water crisis.

It has been said that the eliminating the State Board would increase accountability. The board is not opposed to accountability, but some of us question "accountability" meaning heavy handed punishment on teachers and communities for low scores on high-stakes standardized tests. The Mackinaw Center has shown that high staked standardized tests are strongly correlated with socio-economic status of the students. This results in schools with some of the biggest challenges in high poverty areas being punished for things outside of their control. The American Statistical Association has clearly stated that teacher evaluations based on these scores are invalid. These tactics have led to a 50% decline in enrollment of teacher education students and huge number of vacancies in qualified teachers throughout our state, but in particular in our higher poverty communities. Instead, we have supported a partnership model to look more closely at the unique circumstances for the low scores and bringing more oversight and resources to address this.

I would think if we truly want greater accountability then we should have a constitution that makes clear that citizens are entitled to a quality education. Instead, the constitution simply reads that the State is directed to maintain and support Michigan's free public elementary and secondary school system. Because of this the state successfully argued in court that even though they had taken over Highland Park public schools, we were not accountable for failure left behind.

Some say giving more power to the Governor would make things simpler. That reminds me of a quote from the renowned journalist H.L. Mencke when he said:

*"For every complex problem, there is an answer that is clear, simple,
... and wrong."*

Democracy, by its nature is messy. Authoritarianism is simpler. I'll take democracy any day of the week.

Finally, I would like to point out that the structure and authority as provided in the 1963 state constitution was in existence for the decades when the state was considered a national leader in public education. It's authority on policy decisions greatly changed in 1999 when the state supreme court reversed a court injunction, letting Governor Engler's Executive order to removing the bulk of policy decisions from the Board to the state superintendent stand. This was soon followed by No Child Left Behind, a great recession which sharply reduced property taxes and placed Michigan high on the list for child poverty, we experienced cuts in education funding, uncapped, loosely regulated for-profit charter and cyber schools, emergency management, and the EAA.

Perhaps we should focus on these issues rather than deflecting to the State Board of Education.